

ANTIQUITY OF GAṆEŚA - THE NUMISMATIC EVIDENCE

There is little doubt that the very title of the present paper will sound rather odd for the simple reason that every student of Indian numismatics knows that there is no representation of Gaṇeśa — the elephant-headed god — on any coin of ancient India and it is also equally well known that the coin type of Huviska with the legend Gaṇeśa actually has on it the figure of Śiva, who was the « Lord of *gaṇas* ». But there is nevertheless some evidence to show that the representation of elephant on some of the early Indian coins, more especially those from the Gandhara region in the northwest of the sub-continent, is in some way or other connected with the elephant-headed god. The present paper is therefore an attempt at studying the representations of elephant on early Indian coins, more particularly those of the Indo-Greeks and finding out if they are relevant to the problem of the evolution of the elephant-headed divinity — Gaṇeśa.

Elephant is one of the most conspicuous motifs on Indo-Greek coins. Although it appears on the earlier punch-marked coins, it is depicted most realistically on the coinage of Indo-Greeks. It is one of the few truly Indian motifs which is represented on the coinage of foreigners who ruled in the early period. The elephant, as is well known, is one of the sacred animals to the Hindus and the Buddhists as well, and it was so even in the remotest past as its representations on Indus seals would show. But it is difficult to hazard any guess regarding the religious affiliation of the elephant that is to be seen on Indo-Greek coins. Nonetheless, it is equally clear that its representation on coinage must have certainly satisfied both the Hindu and the Buddhist populations in the northwestern India.

The most realistic and the full-bodied representation of elephant occurs on the coins of Apollodotus. These are squarish pieces of silver on which we have, on the obverse, a standing elephant facing left with the legend in Greek while on the reverse is shown a standing bull facing

and with the legend in Kharoshthi. This coin type, which marks a distinct deviation in the Indo-Greek coinage, has been taken to have definite religious significance, for in this case the bust of the king on the obverse and the usual Greek divinities on the reverse have been replaced by animals which are characteristically Indian. Even the bull is of the typical *Bos indicus* — the humped variety. The elephant is also equally Indian. Another Indian religious symbol is the *nandipāda* which occurs on the reverse, above the hump of the bull and the other on the elephant on the obverse¹, and the conjunction of these two types is imitated by subsequent kings who ruled in the northwestern parts of the sub-continent viz., Heliocles and the Sakas — Maues, Azes and Azilizes. The fact that Apollodotus' « humped » bull and elephant' type became a regular type of the Saka kings also shows that it had a considerable local significance. The full bodied elephant occurs on the coins of Antimachus I and II², Menander³, Heliocles, Lysias, Archebius, Azes and Azilizes. On some of the coins of Demetrius (I), Menander, and Maues, the elephant is shown with a bell round its neck while on some issues of Apollodotus the animal is adorned with a band round its body⁴. On some issues of Antimachus II the elephant is shown striding with its trunk upraised⁵.

On the square copper coins of Antialkidas we find the elephant holding a wreath in its upraised trunk⁶ and the same motif is copied by Maues on some of his square copper coins where, however, the animal is shown running⁷. The latter type has become somewhat controversial, for it has on the obverse a human figure seated cross-legged on a cushion. Gardner⁸ is of the opinion that the figure is that of the king whereas Tarn identifies it as that of the Buddha. He observes that « the elephant is not running; he has both his forefeet high in the air and any Indian Greek knew well enough that elephants do not run like that. The creature is dancing, dancing on its hind legs and offering a wreath to the seated figure »⁹.

On a bronze issue of Zoilus we have on the obverse Apollo clad in chalmys and boots, holding bow and arrow in his hands and quiver at the back; and near him on left is a small elephant¹⁰. This association

1. PERCY GARDNER, *Coins of Greek and Scythic Kings of Bactria and India in the British Museum*, Chicago, 1966, new print, pl. 34, n. 10 (this work is hereinafter referred to as BMC).

2. A. N. LAHIRI, *Corpus of Indo-Greek Coins*, Calcutta, 1965, p. 88, pl. VI, 7.

3. BMC, p. 169, pl. XXXI, 4.

4. BMC, pl. IX, 8, 9.

5. LAHIRI, *op. cit.*, pl. VI, 9.

6. *Ibid.*, p. 87, pl. VI, 18.

7. BMC, p. 70, pl. XVII, 5.

8. *Ibid.*

9. W. W. TARN, *The Greeks in Bactria and India*, Cambridge, 1951, 2nd ed., pp. 401-2.

10. BMC, p. 53, pl. XII, 12.

of elephant with Apollo is indeed significant. As we shall see later, it is the divine character of the elephant which forced the Greek rulers to associate the animal with their own gods.

Elephant head is also shown on some coin types. On bronze issues of Demetrius, who was the son and successor of Euthydemus, we find the elephant head on right with bell round his neck shown on the obverse while the reverse has caduceus¹¹. This was later copied by Maues. On a bronze square coin of Menander also we find on the obverse an elephant head on right, with bell round its neck while on the reverse is the club. Similarly on a bronze round coin of Maues is shown the head of elephant with bell round its neck on obverse while on reverse is the caduceus¹².

Tarn is inclined to identify the elephant that we see on these coin types with that of Taxila. He states that, « There is a story which may bear on the elephant of Taxila. It is known that Philostratus when he wrote on the life of Apollonius he had before him a pretty accurate description of Parthian Taxila by some one who had visited it, and he says that at Taxila there was a very old elephant, once belonging to Porus whom Alexander had dedicated in the temple of the Sun and had named Aias, and whom the people used to anoint with myrrh and adorn with fillets (*Life of Apollonius*, II, 20). Philostratus attributes many things to Alexander and Porus, but the story might really be evidence for the existence at Taxila of a sacred elephant, the elephant of the coins; the bell round the elephant's neck on the elephant head coin type of Demetrius, Menander and Maues would support this »¹³. However, J. N. Banerjea is inclined to identify the elephant with the elephant diety of Kapiśā. He states: « On the basis of our main hypothesis, it will be possible for us to suggest that the device "elephant's head" with a bell round his neck' used by Demetrius on some of his copper coins and other Indo-Greek and the Śaka rulers like Menander and Maues was associated with this elephant deity, peculiar to Kapiśā and its environs. We are not certain whether the elephant used as a device on so many coins of these kings is in any way connected with it; but if any connection between two could be proved, then one could demonstrate the extreme popularity of the device »¹⁴.

The representation of elephant on a coin type of Antialkidas is extremely interesting and is certainly not without significance. These coins are of silver and are round in shape¹⁵. On the obverse they have the bust of the king while on the reverse is shown Zeus sitting on throne, holding Nike in his right hand, who in her turn, bears wreath

11. *Ibid.*

12. *Ibid.*, pl. XVI.

13. *Op. cit.*, p. 164.

14. « Indian Elements on Coin Devices of Foreign Rulers of India », *IHQ*, vol. XIV, 1938, pp. 300-1.

15. BMC, p. 25, pl. VII, 9-14.

and palm; on left is the forepart of an elephant. He has a bell round the neck and he has raised his trunk. It appears as if Nike is garlanding the elephant who is accepting the wreath with his upraised trunk. The same motif is copied by the Śaka king Maues on the reverse of his bronze square coins¹⁶. Here Zeus, the greatest of the Greek divinities, seems to be paying his respects to the elephant who then can be said to be not a mere animal, who was of great use as it served as the veritable tank in the army, but seems to have been accorded equal position with Greek deities.

Of this coin type we can distinguish four different varieties which were all issued by Antialcidas. On the obverse of all the varieties the bust of the king is depicted. On the reverse of one variety (silver, round) is shown « Zeus seated on throne left; holds in right Nike who bears wreath and palm; in left, long sceptre; in field left forepart of elephant with bell round neck who raises his trunk¹⁷. The same device was also used by Maues on the reverse of his square bronze coins¹⁸.

On one variety there is Zeus seated on left on throne; holding in right hand palm and wreath; in the left is sceptre; to the left is a small elephant upwards, who grasps the wreath in his trunk¹⁹. But here Nike is absent. On yet another coin there is on the reverse « Zeus seated on throne left; holding in right hand Nike and in left the sceptre; the left is the forepart of an elephant who carries off the wreath of Nike »²⁰.

On one copper coin of Antialcidas, which is squarish in shape, there is the bust of the king on the obverse and on the reverse is depicted elephant to right, holding wreath in its upraised trunk²¹. Since this is an issue of Antialcidas, there should be little doubt that it can also be grouped with the preceding varieties with the only difference that Zeus with Nike is absent in this case. Similar device is also used on a square bronze coin of Maues. Here, however, it is on the obverse that we find elephant running right and holding in his trunk wreath in square of fillet pattern while on the reverse is the king seated cross legged²².

To the same series may also be added yet another coin type of Antialcidas. Here we have on the obverse the bust of the king to the left thrusting javelin while on the reverse is shown elephant walking left with Nike on his head and the radiate, sceptred Zeus by his side²³.

16. *Ibid.*, p. 70 (not illustrated).

17. BMC, p. 25, pl. VII, 9.

18. *Ibid.*, p. 70 (not illustrated).

19. *Ibid.*, p. 25, pl. VII, 10.

20. *Ibid.*, p. 25, pl. VII, 14.

21. LAHIRI, *op. cit.*, p. 87, pl. V, 18.

22. BMC, p. 70, pl. XVII, 5.

23. LAHIRI, *op. cit.*, p. 85, pl. V, 13.

The most interesting coin type is the well-known Kapiśā coin²⁴. The type has been described as follows:

Obv. Diademed bust of king to right, wearing helmet. Greek legend — *Basileos Megalou Eukratidou*.

Rev. A deity wearing a mural crown, seated on throne to front, holds wreath and palm; to right of throne forepart of elephant to right, and to left, a pilos (?) Kharosthi legend — *Kavi(pi)-siye nagara devatā*.

This coin has been discussed at great length by several numismatists. Charles Mason, the first discoverer of the coin, found one at Begram which has been identified with the ancient Kapiśā. He identified the enthroned figure as a female deity²⁵. But E. Thomas suggested that the deity might be identical with Zeus of Antialcidas' coin²⁶. Cunningham, however, straightway called the deity Zeus²⁷. Many later scholars followed Cunningham in his description of the coin²⁸. Tarn also accepted it and has given reasons for the identification of the deity as Zeus²⁹. Whitehead, however, came across a beautiful specimen of this type in the British Museum. He observed that, «The divinity in so many words called a city deity, wears a mural crown, carries a palm but not a sceptre, in fact she is a city goddess. She precisely resembles the city Tyche on the copper coin of Hippostratus³⁰. A. K. Narain, who has examined all the five specimens in the British Museum and a few more in private collections, is also convinced that the divinity wears «a mural crown and carries a palm but not a sceptre». He feels that it may rather be compared with the city fortune on a copper coin of Hippostratus, on a silver coin of Maues and on a copper coin of Azilizes; on certain specimens the figure seems certainly female. Further, two other points observed by Whitehead are also quite pertinent: the legend itself precisely calls it the city deity of Kapiśā, and that the deity cannot be Zeus on the coins of Maues and Azilizes, since in each case he appears on the reverse of the coin³¹.

The coin has thus become the subject of much discussion. Moreover, the enthroned figure on the coin has also been variously interpreted. Some scholars would like to connect the elephant on the coin with Buddhism³². The most interesting interpretation has been given by J. N. Banerjea. He identifies the enthroned figure as that of Indra who

24. *Ibid.*, pp. 126-27, pl. XVII, 2.

25. JASB, 1834, p. 164, pl. VIII, 11.

26. Cited by LAHIRI, *op. cit.*, p. 127.

27. *Numismatic Chronicle*, 1869, p. 225, n. 21, pl. (c) VI, 6.

28. BMC, p. 19, pl. VI, 8.

29. TARN, *op. cit.*, p. 138.

30. *Numismatic Chronicle*, 1947, p. 30, fig. 1.

31. A. K. NARAIN, *The Indo-Greeks*, Oxford, 1957, p. 63.

32. JRAS, 1941, pp. 63-4; MASI, n. 46, pp. 28-32.

was also known as the *yakṣa* of Indrapura in the *Mahāmāyūrī*. According to him the place *Si-pi-to-fa-la-tzu* referred to by Yuan Chwang, that is, Śvetavatālaya, the abode of Indra, who incidentally was also known as Śvetavat. He further states that, « It is possible to identify the central device of the coin as 'Indra enthroned with the partial representation of his mount Airāvata (the White Elephant) before him ». Śvetasvatālaya, according to the description of Yuan Chwang, was a suburb of Kapiśā in the seventh century A.D., and its very name indicates that it had Indra as its tutelary deity. Banerjea concludes: « So in the Indo-Bactrian money, enthroned Zeus and *devarāja* Indra are often confused and it will be better to describe those figures as Indra where he is accompanied by an elephant or partial representation of an elephant »³³.

It thus becomes apparent that the enthroned deity on the coin is not Zeus but the city deity of Kapiśā. But whether it is a male or a female is doubtful. It has been taken to be a female because of its resemblance with city Tyche on the copper coin of Hippostratus. It should, however, be borne in mind that a majority of scholars identified the figure as that of Zeus because they took it to be a male figure. It is possible that she can be taken to be a female because a majority of city deities were females such as the city goddess of Puṣkarāvati. Here we should take into consideration the identification of the coin by Rapson. Of the two symbols viz., the elephant head and the mountain, Rapson identifies for former as the mountain Pilusāra and the other as the elephant god, of the mountain as also the city of Kapiśā. Rapson was the first to connect the two symbols and the legend recorded by Yuan Chwang regarding the tutelary deity of Kapiśā³⁴. The celebrated Chinese traveller visited India during 629-645 A.D. In 630 A.D. he travelled through Afghanistan where he spent considerable time visiting Buddhist establishments and spent a whole summer in Kapiśā. He has recorded a very curious and interesting legend regarding the tutelary deity of the city of Kapiśā. We can do no better than quote the words of the pilgrim:

« To the southwest of the capital (Kapiśā) was *Pi-lo-sho-lo* mountain. This name was given to the mountain from its presiding genius who had the form of an elephant and was therefore called *Pi-lo-sho-lo* »³⁵.

Yuan Chwang's testimony amply demonstrates that in the seventh century Pilusāra was the tutelary deity of Kapiśā which had the form

33. « Indian Elements on Coin Devices of Foreign Rulers of India », *IHQ*, vol. XIV, 1938, pp. 299-300.

34. E. J. RAPSON, *The Cambridge History of India*, vol. I, Cambridge, 1922, pp. 555-56.

35. THOMAS WATERS, *On Yuan Chwang's Travels in India*, Delhi, 1961, first Indian edn., vol. I, p. 129.

of an elephant. It seems that the tradition had great antiquity for the deity, as pointed out by Rapson, was depicted on an early Indo-Greek coin of second century B.C. The scholars who tried to identify the enthroned deity on the coin as Zeus or Indra as also those who take it to be a female deity have overlooked the guardian deity of Kapiśā which is portrayed on the coin and is also specified by the legend. That the guardian deity was the elephant genus has been clearly testified by Yuan Chwang. Whether the deity is male or female is immaterial, for the mint masters were here facing a curious problem of depicting a sacred animal. It was the problem of the therianthropomorphic representation that they faced. What they did was to portray the deity enthroned and show the forepart of an elephant by its side; they could not possibly think of the combination of the thriomorphic and the anthropomorphic representation of the deity. This would also show that they never bothered about the male or the female character of the deity. But this ultimately has caused a controversy among scholars. However, in the light of the discussion in the preceding pages it should become clear that the coin depicts the anthropomorphic form of the tutelary deity of Kapiśā enthroned; but that it was in the form of an elephant is clear from the forepart of the beast and its abode in the mountain into the south-west of the city is shown by pilos on the coin.

The most interesting representation of elephant on some of the Indo-Greek coins is that in the form of a scalp, which crowns the king's headgear³⁶. Demetrius, the son and successor of Euthydemus was the first king to be depicted with elephant's scalp on his silver coins and also on some of his bronze coins. The same device was later borrowed by Agathocles and Lysias who are shown on their coins in the same way. It is said that even Alandander and Ptolemy had issued certain coins on which they were shown wearing elephant scalp on their helmet. We do not know whether these coins were issued to commemorate Alexander's conquest of India. But this would then be a strange way of symbolising a conquest. If at all it means something, then it certainly shows the reverence of the issuing authorities for elephant. As Whitehead has observed in the case of Lysias, it can be interpreted « to mean that he (the issuing king) regarded himself as under the protection of the elephant god of Kapiśā »³⁷. In this connection it should be noted that Alexander had great regard for the elephant of Taxila whose story has already been narrated. We should agree with Tarn according to whom this story might really be the evidence for the existence at Taxila of a sacred elephant, the elephant of the coins, with the bell round his neck³⁸. This sacred elephant becomes the commonest device on the coins of Taxila. In fact the elephant head with bell around his neck

36. BMC, pl. II, 9-12.

37. R. B. WHITEHEAD, *Catalogue of the coins in the Panjab Museum, Lahore*, vol. I, Oxford, 1914, p. 326, n. 4.

38. TARN, *op. cit.*, p. 164.

has been identified by scholars with the sacred elephant of Taxila³⁹.

The next logical step was to produce a therionthropomorphic representation of the elephant-headed deity. It takes place in the time of the last Indo-Greek ruler Hermaeus, on one of whose coin types we have a clear representation of Gaṇeśa. The coin has recently been noticed by A. K. Narain in the old collections in the British Museum. « If this is accepted », observes A. K. Narain, « surely this would be the earliest representation of Gaṇeśa and a veritable specimen of syncretic tendencies which started operating from the time of the Indo-Greeks and resulted in the formation of many new gods and goddesses. This is also an example of how a local deity was transformed or, if you may like to say, elevated to the respectable status »⁴⁰.

The foregoing account of the elephant motif on the coins of foreign rulers, more particularly of the Indo-Greeks, shows that the animal which was sacred to the Hindus was also held in reverence by the foreign rulers who wanted to win over the population to their side. It may be interesting to note in this connection the fact that there are quite a good number of places in Panjab, more appropriately the ancient Gandhara which are associated with elephant in their names. To begin with Kapiśā, the name signifies that the place was « endowed with elephant ». So also is the case of Puṣkarāvātī, for *puṣkara* means elephant. It is also significant that the ancient site Hastanagar is named after king Hastin, the hero of the eponymous tribe. It was a city of elephants like the Hastināpura of the Kauravas and Vāraṇavata of the Pandavas. We have already narrated the story of the sacred elephant of Taxila. Cunningham identified the ancient site at Palo-dheri which was the ancient township of Polusa⁴¹, referred to by Yuan Chwang. According to him to the north-east of the town rose the hill of Dantaloka, with a cave, in which Prince Sudana, and his wife had taken refuge. This is about forty miles from Potali. Very probably the association of elephant with several places in the Gandhara region may be due to its being the habitat of the tribe of the Hastikas. The historians of Alexander mention of a king named Astes (Hasti) as ruling over a people called Astakenoi (Hastikas) living in the region of Puṣkarāvātī. Arrian states that when Alexander's army, together with the local chiefs, reached the Indus, they carried out all orders of Alexander. But Astes, the ruler of the land of Peucelaotis (Puṣkarāvati), rose in revolt which both ruined himself and brought ruin also upon the city which he fled for refuge. Hephastion, the general of Alexander, captured it after a siege of thirty days and Astes himself was killed⁴².

39. BANERJEA, *op. cit.*, IHQ, vol. XIV, 1938, pp. 330-33.

40. Presidential Address, JNSI, vol. XXXVI, 1974, p. 190.

41. S. MAJUMDAR SASTRI (ed.), *Cunningham's Ancient Geography of India*, Calcutta, 1924, p. 60.

42. R. C. MAJUMDAR, *Classical Accounts of India*, Calcutta, 1960, p. 257.

Strabo also in his Geography describes that after the Cophes (the Kabul river) followed Indus, and the region between these rivers was occupied by Astacenoī (Hastikas), Masiani, Myaai, and Hispacii⁴³. Pliny records that « They (many writers) include also the Astaceni, in whose country the vine grows abundantly and the laurel and boxwood and every kind of fruit tree found in Greece »⁴⁴.

The accounts of classical writers thus show that there lived in fourth century B.C. in the Kabul valley the valiant tribe of Hastikas who were ruled, at the time of Alexander's invasion by a king named Hasti. The tribe was there even in 6th-5th cent. B.C. as Pāṇini refers to the Hastināyanas as occupying the area near the confluence of the Swat and the Kabul, with their capital at Puṣkarāvati⁴⁵. The Hastināyanas of Panini are in all probability the Hastikas of the classical accounts. The region occupied by the Hastikas formed in ancient times a part of the Gandhara country which in its turn was an integral part of India from the earliest epoch of Indo-Aryan civilization. It is unique among the countries of India in that its history can be traced in unbroken continuity right from the Rīgvedic times to the present day.

We do not know about the Hastikas beyond what has been recorded by classical writers and Pāṇini. However, they appear to be quite a valiant people. The name of their king — Hasti — and their capital and other places in their country were all associated with elephant. It is therefore not unlikely that the elephant was extremely sacred to them; it might have been their totem as well. After conquering them the Indo-Greek rulers possibly introduced elephant on their coins to win over the loyalty of the Hastikas.

Last but not the least important is the name of the guardian deity of Kapiśā which Yuan Chwang has given as Piluśāra. This name can be favourably compared with *Pillaiyar* which is the Dravidian name for Gaṇeśa and is still current in south India. The present name is no doubt a corrupt form of his ancient title and is obviously derived from the Dravidian words *paḷḷu* or *peḷḷa*, both signifying tooth, that is, the tusk of the elephant although in the present form there is no meaning of « tusk ». *Piḷḷa* is the Tamil word for child, and *Piḷḷaiyār* means a noble child, but *piḷḷa* originally meant the « young of an elephant ». However, from the similarity between the names it seems that *Piḷḷaiyār* is derived from Piluśāra for when Sanskrit words were borrowed into Tamil, *śa* or *śa* was sometimes changed into *ya*⁴⁶. The ancient name of Gaṇeśa thus survives in south India where many of the Hindu traditions still continue in an unadulterated form.

43. *Ibid.*

44. *Ibid.*, p. 345.

45. V. S. AGRAWALA, *India as known to Panini*, Lucknow, 1953, pp. 453-54.

46. M. R. RAJAGOPALA IYENGAR, « Phonetic changes in Tamil words borrowed from Classical Sanskrit », *Jr. of Oriental Research*, vol. XVI, 1940, p. 57.